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IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS

13 Dragora's Inner Sanctum

Fight to the Death in Cobra's Keep

Julek Heller

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From a story by Frank Graves

On the Thirteenth Day . . .

Three heads to find the true,
Three jaws to bite them.
Six eyes to see the few,
One king to fight them.
Venom hides the golden goal,
Another prize awaits.
Released it takes a dreadful toll
On those who chance its fate.
Deep in darkest tomb,
Beware the cracks of doom.

Out of sight of her captor, Kika fumbled desperately for her blowpipe. Her breath came in punished gasps as the scorpion's grip tightened. Her chest was on the point of collapse. She whipped the blowpipe round and up to her lips. A dart was already in place.

As the scorpion glowered triumphantly, Kika wriggled out of its grasp. With the last wind left in her lungs, she blew into its face. The dart punctured the scorpion's left eye, then burrowed into his brain.

Kika dropped to the ground, surrounded by the clash of battle. Richard and Orkan were struggling towards her, fighting a rearguard action with weapons that were chipped and dented from the scorpions' steel-hard armour.

"Go!" the Guardian shouted. "Hide! I'll look after myself."

Before the others had time to take in her words, she was gone, her delicate wings beating valiantly against the thick desert soup that filled the air.

"Follow me!" Richard shouted, and dodged sideways off the main street. Melek and Orkan stumbled after him.

Sand screen

The three found themselves between two buildings, in a narrow alleyway that was barely wide enough to take them standing sideways. The sandstorm rose to a shriek, obliterating all sight of their enemy.

"Well, what do we do next?" Orkan said.

"Look at the Path Finder!" Richard shouted back. "We've got to go for the pod. We mustn't waste our time and energy fighting!"

Melek drew out the Path Finder and

handed it to Richard. He and Orkan watched nervously as the arrow's tip glowed gold when Richard pointed it to their right.

Outside, beyond their shelter, the scorpions clattered to and fro in a blind rage, all sense of direction lost amid the battering clouds of sand.

Circle of statues

The trio ducked out of the narrow alleyway and clambered up into a vast deserted square. The companions were now alone – three blind fugitives in a world of yellow sand.

Richard's knuckles brushed painfully against a stone surface. From what he could see amid the whirling sandstorm, it was a statue flanked by columns on either side. During a momentary lull, he saw a wide circle of columns and statues spreading out around them.

Richard moved off, his fingertips touching the regularly spaced columns. They seemed to go on forever. Then Kika dropped gently to the ground beside him with a gentle flutter of wings.

"The pod is in there somewhere," Richard said to the Guardian. "There must be a secret entrance."

The four companions moved along as they searched. They came to a plinth that held no statue. The sand around it was pounded flat from the passage of feet.

"This is it!" Orkan shouted jubilantly.

The four hopped on to the plinth and began to search for irregularities, pushing against every slight

bump in the stone. Nothing gave. Nothing moved.

"This has to be the place," Orkan whispered.

"Wait," Richard said, "what's that there?" He pointed to a ball by the edge of the plinth. "I'll give it a try."

He reached down and gave the ball a hard push. Even as he did, he felt the plinth sink slightly beneath him, and heard a gritty click from some underground mechanism. Slowly, the plinth began to tip forward.

"Hold on!" Richard shouted.

Sand slide

Suddenly, the plinth dipped, sending them careering down a steep, sandy slope.

Richard's feet went from beneath him and he somersaulted helplessly out of control. His journey ended face-down in a mountain of sand. Orkan and Melek landed on either side, watched by Kika who had glided gently through the air.

The stone chamber in which they found themselves was surrounded by massive carved pillars. Snake shapes spiralled along the walls, opening out into enormous reptilian mouths. The room was empty, save

for a shapeless mound half-lost in shadows at the other end. Richard could not suppress a feeling of apprehension.

"I don't like the look of that," Richard said. "I'm going to investigate."

Even as he spoke, Richard heard a slithering rustle coming from the mound. It had begun to change shape. A tail curled around an elaborate throne. Then three monstrous heads rose into the air, their hoods spread out, casting evil black shadows across the room.

"Dragora. The three-headed cobra," Kika whispered. "She must have been asleep."

Like lightning, the serpent darted at the intruders, her heads coiling back before spitting

forward at three separate targets. The four scattered wildly in all directions. Kika felt a fierce black tongue pierce one of her wings, but was gone before Dragora's fangs could get a grip.

Orkan swivelled as the snake was coiling back for a second strike, and loosed an arrow at one of her heads. It missed, but a second arrow sank deep into one of Dragora's necks. A thin, high-pitched scream echoed around the room. The stricken head swirled and lashed in agony. The other heads, meanwhile, lunged with deadly intent at their prey.

Missed target

One of Dragora's black tongues snickered out over Melek's face, and then her teeth sank deep into their target. Luckily, the scribe had turned, and the snake's fangs lodged into the *Book of Prophecies*. Melek ran from his attacker and heard a tearing noise. The book had fallen to the floor, and its ancient spine had been ripped open. Consumed with fear, Melek never noticed the Path Finder rolling away in the sand.

Dragora struck and struck again, but to no avail. Her prey were too quick. Orkan unleashed a barrage of arrows. Most of them flew wide, but one found its target. It lodged in one eye, and another venomous head fell out of commission. Dragora squirmed in rage-filled agony. At the same time Kika was spewing a hail of well-aimed darts. In the end, Orkan fired the arrow that burst into the monstrous cobra's heart. Dragora fell to the ground, pulses of venom spurting from her jaws.

Doom and gloom

"Give me the Path Finder," Richard commanded, as the great snake writhed in her death throes. Melek scuttled over to retrieve the *Book of Prophecies*, and felt with dismay the tattered bindings that had once held the precious instrument.

"Oh no, it's gone!" Melek said in a tone of doom, wiping a thin film of sweat from his forehead.

"We'd better find it quick," Richard said. "Let's spread out and keep our eyes peeled."

They shuffled slowly across the room, scraping their feet through the sand that covered the floor.

"Over here!" Orkan's excited shout brought everyone at the run.

"Well done," Richard said, as he drew near. "We'd

have been lost without . . .”

“No,” Orkan interrupted. “It’s not the Path Finder, but look at this.” He pointed to an iron grille set into the floor. “There’s something moving down there.”

Richard peered through the grille. There was a dry rustling, as if thousands of scaly creatures were crawling about beneath their feet. A dry, musky odour wafted up through the snake-shaped bars.

“Let’s take a look,” Richard said.

Together, he and Orkan levered off the grille and tipped it to one side. It fell on the sandy floor with a dull clang. For a moment there was only silence from the darkness below.

Reptile forces released

Tentatively, a reptilian snout peered out of the hole. It pointed around the room in a wavering fashion. Then, very slowly, a large lizard hauled itself into Dragora’s lair. Its skin had a beautiful iridescent hue, like a slick of oil under a summer sun, but

there was an odd quality to its movements, as if it was recovering from a long, drugged sleep. As it staggered about the room, Richard was reminded of the beasts the trio had freed from Enlil's dungeon.

"Zard's reptile forces," Kika murmured with relief, as another snout appeared, then another. "Our numbers grow."

As he watched the reptiles emerge, Richard felt a trickle of sweat run down his face. For a moment, he dismissed it as the excitement of battle. Then, as he looked around, he saw that even the bewildered lizards were glowing with a moist sheen. The room was getting warmer. He looked at Kika – her wings were wilting.

"It's Dragora," she explained. "Her power sucked the lifeforce from Sand City, and now she's dead, it's being released. We've got to move fast. This place is becoming an inferno."

Richard thought quickly – spotting the Path Finder was going to be difficult with the reptiles wandering about the place.

"I've got it!" Orkan gave a jubilant cry. "I trod on it, but it's not broken."

Richard snatched the Path Finder, and checked the glass. He turned on his heels, and as the instrument passed Dragora, its tip shone gold. Richard thought for a moment. Suddenly he remembered the prophecy – Venom hides the golden goal.

Secret of the Pathfinder

The Pod had to be somewhere on Dragora. Richard heaved a sigh of relief, which quickly turned to dismay when he realized what lay ahead of them. He looked at the Path Finder.

"I wish we knew how this worked," he said to Melek.

Melek was crouching by the *Book of Prophecies*, flicking the sand from the pages. Suddenly his back stiffened.

"It's here," he cried. "The Path Finder riddle. Come and look."

They each read the words on the page.

Across Green fields, Overland you go,
where winter solstice White brings Ice and snow.
The Grey dove flies to fresher Air,
and shuns the Yellow swamp of Wastes' despair.
When Blue eyes, to Water clear aspire,
round campsites Orange tongues will wag in Fire.
Out of Stone, rise Cities cloaked in sand,
and Brown caves weave in secret, Underland.
The Silver moon shines potent magic Light,
though Black skies loom in silent dark of Night.
Golden glimmers brightest on the spear,
and leads to Good, when journey's end is near.

"It's the colours in the arrow," Richard cried. "They show what lies ahead. Green means overland. The arrow turned green before we got to the Forest of Findor, do you remember? Let me try it here."

As Richard swung the Path Finder round, the arrow pulsed a burnished shade of chestnut. "You see," he cried, "brown shows that we're under the land. We must be careful with it now."

With a glance at the torn spine on the *Book of Prophecies*, Richard placed the instrument in his own bag. "We must search Dragora," he said, "the Pod is on her somewhere. In her coils, maybe."

They looked at the dead snake in disgust. Her body was beginning to swell in the heat, and already a faint whiff of decay reached their nostrils. Sections were beginning to bloat and split to release a foul-smelling pus.

Holding their breath, the four began the search. Richard prised open one of Dragora's sharp-fanged mouths and saw a familiar glint of purple. Jammed into a cavity of Dragora's jaw, was a Pod. Of course. Why hadn't he thought of it before? Snakes inject their venom through their teeth!

Richard reached in and plucked out the pod. It came free with a dull sucking noise. As he turned to show the others his prize, a wave of dizziness came over him. The temperature was rising dangerously.

An ominous secret

Orkan was also feeling the heat. He had made his own discovery. Around one of Dragora's necks was an amulet. For a moment he was tempted to call the others, but as he stared at the small object, a strange urge came over him.

The stone lured him into its dark depths, beckoning with warm promise.

As if in a dream, Orkan hoisted the deadweight of Dragora's neck and slipped off the amulet. He slung it round his neck, tucking it inside his clothes. Then reality returned.

"Come on!" Richard was saying. "We must find a way out of here."

For the second time that day, they began to look for a hidden passage. Orkan ran his fingers over the smooth amulet. It gave him a feeling of confidence. Yes, it had been the right decision to take it, and one day he would tell his friends about his wonderful secret. Not

now – now was not the right time.

Or were they his friends? The thought jumped unbidden into his mind. What had they done for him? They were just using him as an expendable strongarm. Come the right time, he would slip away and find his own fortune elsewhere.

A sudden jolt from the ground interrupted Orkan's thoughts. It felt as if a gigantic boot had kicked the floor from underneath.

Another jolt threw them all off their feet. Cracks began to open in the floor, snaking across the sand, up the walls and into the ceiling.

"The chamber's collapsing!" Kika cried.

The four looked about in despair. There was no escape route. The reptiles were scuttling in a frenzy of panic, pawing at the walls. Orkan turned to Richard, a mad light shining in his eyes. A chunk of ceiling fell with a crash between them.

Orkan began to laugh wildly. "There's no escape. Never!"

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

Look out for these friendly little creatures again. They can be found somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

In issue 12, Shoomi and Shoobi were on pages 180 and 184.

Path Finder

3-Minute Challenge

During the struggle with Dragora in Cobra's Keep, the ancient Path Finder was torn from the spine of the *Book of Prophecies*. Can you spot where it landed in less than three minutes?

In issue 12, the fragment of the Evil One's mask was hidden on page 184.

Did you beat the Challenge? If not, try again this time.

Monsters and Magic

After you have finished Dragora's Inner Sanctum, read about the Hydra and the Feathered Serpent on Morbane's story cards. Which of these characters do you think Dragora is based on?

In issue 12, the Scorpion guards were based on the Servants of the Sun.

Check your answers in the next issue.

The Ancestral Trail

Cut out the location recorder, locator cards and tokens and keep them safe. Details about the role-playing game and how to play it will appear in future issues.

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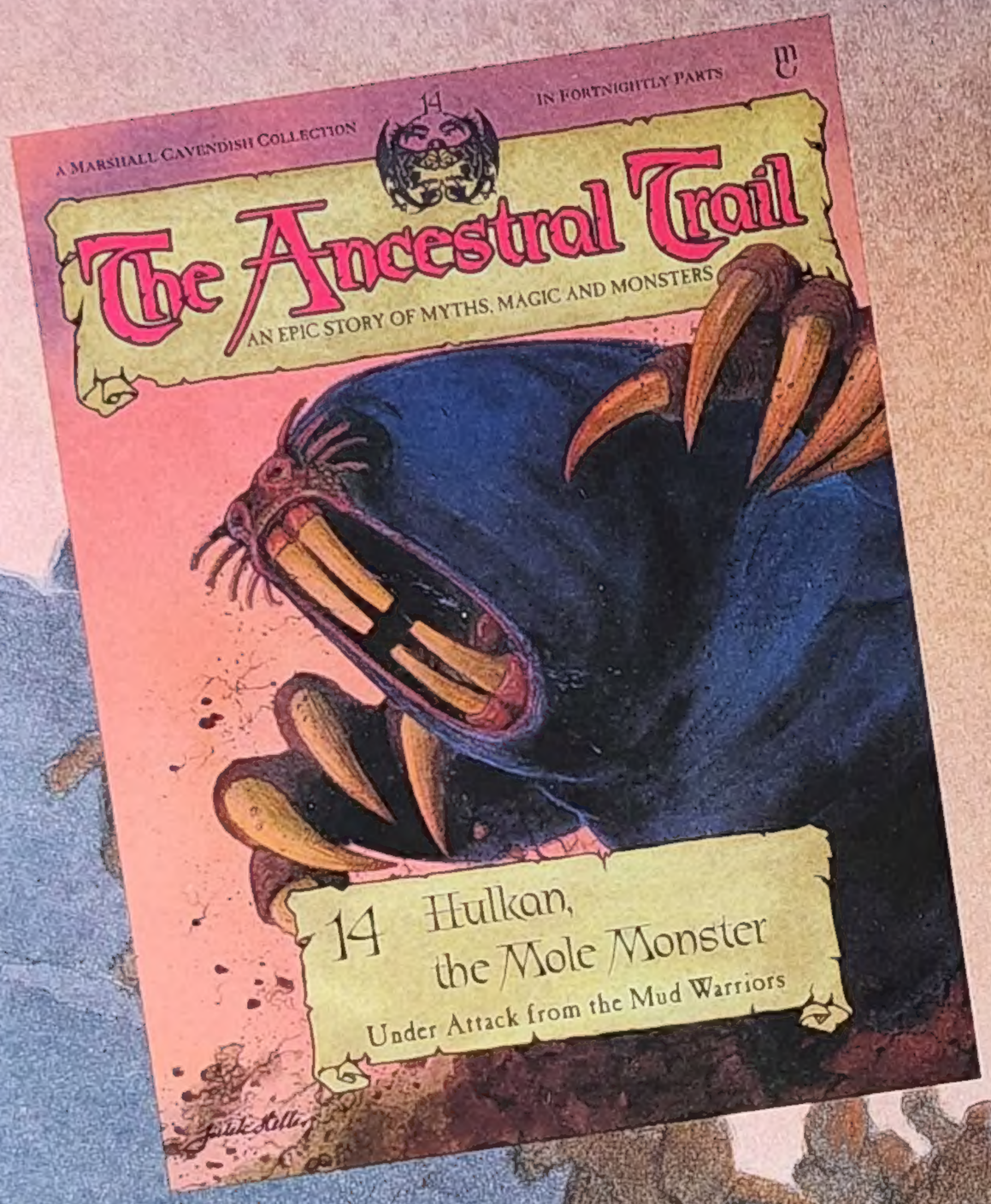
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Under Attack from the Mud Warriors

In Issue 14

Hulkan, the Mole Monster

After their near escape from Sand City, our heroes are cornered by an evil mole monster and his eerie army of mud warriors. How will the trio cope with the unstoppable onslaught?

plus

- Morbane tells us about slithering mischief-makers who create havoc all around them.
- Another puzzle piece for the Ancestral World map.
- More pieces for the role-playing game.

Coming in Issue 15

Narkum, the Fly King

Seeking refuge inside a tree in the Black Forest, the travellers find the kind of welcome they could do without.

plus

From Morbane – tales of creatures from whom no secret is safe • The first section of **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game instructions.

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